TO BE A HERO

Urban Ministry Conference

Friday, October 14, 1994

John M. Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture — Ephesians 5:21 - 6:13

Far be it from me to question the choices of scripture to be studied and employed as homiletical texts by this conference but I need to confess that I was a little surprised when I received my assignment. I don't know about you, but that text — "wives be subject to your husbands . . . . slaves, obey your masters" is not in my personal lectionary. I'm a little embarrassed by it. I know, I think, the standard hermeneutical analysis — and I will, in fact, return to it in time. But an awful lot of sadness and tragedy in human history has been associated with these words and so I have ignored and avoided them.

The day of reckoning has come. But I am taking the liberty of extending the text to include verses 10-17. Immediately following the household code and the advise to slaves and slave owners, the author has some strong words to say:

> "Put on the whole armor of God — our struggle is . . . against the rulers, . . . the authorities, . . . cosmic powers . . . of this present darkness, . . . forces of evil." [Ephesians 6:11-12]

Frankly, that sounds a little more like most of the urban ministry I know anything about. And I would submit that it is the heart of what this epistle is about.

Tom Long, who teaches preaching at Princeton, wrote a wonderful lead editorial for the July edition of Theology Today, with the irresistible title, "Beavis and Butthead Get Saved." For some reason I don't think I have to explain to this group who Beavis and Butthead are, stars of MTV's smash hit cartoon, featuring two incredibly obnoxious adolescents who sit in front of the television set talking dirty, making animal sounds and snickers, critiquing and dismissing every sane, normal and decent person they see or encounter with a crude epithet. Beavis and Butthead, Long ~~said~~ says, represent everything that can go wrong with adolescent boys.

Actually Tom Long was writing about the subject everyone who is anyone and quite a few who are not, has had something to say — the continuing numerical decline of the mainline church. We know, thanks to the research of Wade Clark Roof, Donald Luidens, Dean Hoge and Benton Johnson, that one of our main problems is

that "little Christians are simply not growing up to be big Christians any more." Conventional wisdom is that once children grow through the period of pre-critical naivete, when they pretty much believe everything anybody who looks like an authority tells them, and enter the critical, analytical and skeptical years of adolescence and young adulthood they leave, walk out the front door, and there isn't much the church can do except wait it out -- don't panic and don't push too hard. The hope is that they'll be back, after marriage and thirty and babies, they'll come back through the front door and volunteer to teach Sunday School. The trouble is, not enough are doing that. Some are, to be sure. But not enough to stem the tide of numerical loss.

Long questions our patience and passivity and has the audacity to suggest that instead of serving pizza and offering to stand with our young people as they struggle for their identity, we ought to be laying before them and on them the challenge to be different from the culture, to standout, to be counter-culture, to be heroic.

We know, do we not, the reality of consumer thinking? We know, because all the experts tell us it is true, that the way to grow a business or a political party, or a church, is to identify your target market, do research to discover what your market wants, needs and is willing to buy and then give it to them. We know that the way to grow a church -- one way -- is to meet the needs of your natural clientele: boutique religion, a little something for everyone; self-improvement, aerobics, with plenty of parking and child care for all. We know, do we not, that our commitment to consumer religiosity has produced the now infamous "lay liberalism," broad but not deep, long on tolerance but short on loyalty, "channel surfing across the religious spectrum of American life, selecting those options that match their life styles and meet their personal wants" is the way Tom Long puts it.

The numerical decline of the mainline, the continuing decline of the Presbyterian Church, about which there is a monumental amount of hand-wringing and gnashing of teeth, is not the topic of this conference, nor is it a problem urban ministers ordinarily regard as their priority. But maybe, just maybe, we know something. Maybe our problem is not that we ask too much of people, but that we do not ask nearly enough. Maybe the resolution to the malaise is a matter urban ministers know a lot about -- namely the summons to battle, the call to bravery and heroism.

It's at the heart of New Testament faith, a primal courage. You can see it in Jesus and sometimes in his friends: you can see it in the life of the New Testament church in places like Corinth and Rome and Ephesus. At the center of New Testament Christianity is courage to see the truth and tell the truth: courage to challenge conventional wisdom; courage to contend

with and sometimes oppose the authorities; courage to live a new life which sometimes meant dying.

And so the text I have long ignored. What we hear at first is an unfortunate confirmation of patriarchy and centuries of male domination and oppression of women by men. But, in fact, the text begins with a radical egalitarianism-- "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." That's a radical, revolutionary statement in a culture where there is no situation in which a man is subject to a woman, where lines of class and rank and privilege are carefully drawn; where a holiness code determines who associates with, eats with, talks with, sleeps with whom. . . . "Be subject to one another."

And "slaves, be subject to your masters." Did you hear the first hint of egalitarianism, so subtle it is easy to miss? "Masters, do good to your slaves-- both of you have the same masters in heaven, with whom there is no partiality." It's like the author pulls a small but critical stone out of a huge wall. It's only a matter of time till the whole structure of slavery collapses.

And between the time admonitions, another about children: "Obey your parents"; but also "fathers, do not provoke your children." They are the nobodies, non persons. In that culture, children had no rights, no value. John Dominic Crossan says Jesus was nowhere more revolutionary than he was when he called children to him and held them and said they were what the Kingdom of God looks like. "A Glorious Kingdom of Nuisances and Nobodies," Crossan calls it.

And so while the passage seems to uphold and affirm patriarchy and the hierarchy of age and privilege and power, and even slavery, it is in actuality, the announcement of a new reality, a new being, a new Kingdom which exists within the kingdom of this world, a way of living and moving and having being which knows no rank and privilege based on gender or race or age; a state in which each one is affirmed as a child of God, and none are excluded.

To live in that Kingdom, to be its agents and ambassadors, to act in relationship to other human beings as if that Kingdom were a reality is no simple thing. In fact, it is hard work, sometimes dangerous work.

"Be strong. . . . put on the whole armor of God. Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forms of evil," PAUL wrote to the people at Ephesus.

~~Paul~~ I'll leave the authorship question to ~~the~~ Bob Brawley et al and proceed with my assumption that if it wasn't him, it

was someone who knew how he thought. Paul knew that the stakes are high: that the empire is powerful, that entrenched customs and culture do not easily abide criticism, challenge, change. He had learned in Ephesus that economic systems, political systems, systems based on privilege and rank and wealth, do not often voluntarily produce justice or compassion, and in fact can turn quickly violent. Paul knew about the power of death, the threat of death which is the ultimate weapon of the authorities. He knew that to be faithful to Jesus Christ in the world would require strength and determination and heroic courage.

Urban realities are sometimes appropriately described as "cosmic powers of this present darkness." Now, do not misunderstand. I love the city. I want to live nowhere else. But sometimes, the very urban systems which make my life so pleasant, are very different realities for other urbanites.

At the end of this past summer, Chicagoans lived through an urban nightmare. An eleven-year-old boy, carrying a handgun, wounds two children and kills another, fourteen-year-old Shavon Dean. A few days later this eleven-year-old, Robert Sandifer, is hunted down and executed. This is happening in Chicago, not Rwanda, not China, not Nazi Germany. And what to me is more of a moral nightmare than the fact that it happened, is that we have accommodated it.

I don't know what to do about it but I know that we are guilty of a terrible sin if somehow we develop the capacity to shake our head, sigh, take a deep breath, feel grateful that it happens down on the South Side and install another deadbolt on our door and move on. I know that an eleven-year-old boy with a handgun is a violation of everything we believe about creation, about humankind, about what life in community means.

Maybe the mayor should ask the whole city to take a month and have a discussion about what to do about it. Actually I think we do know what to do about it. Everybody who thinks has part of the answer. Robert Sandifer's tragedy began when he was born to a fifteen-year-old single mother. We know the chances for wholeness and health in that situation are slim. Robert was abused as a baby, in trouble in school, with police... so hardened that he thought that being in a court-appointed foster home was "doin time." The truth is that from the day of his birth, Robert was told by his parents, care-givers, the system that didn't know how to cope with him that he didn't matter, that he was worth little if anything, that he was a nuisance and nobody, a disposable object. And he simply lived that out --in eleven short years.

What to do? Could we not make it an urban priority to prevent fifteen-year-olds from having babies? . . . and if that fails, make it our next priority to see that fifteen-year-olds

with babies have the resources to nurture them to health?... and if that fails, make it a priority to see that the baby is not abused?... and if that fails, find a way to put that baby in a place that is safe instead of returning babies to abusive parents in the name of someone's notion of "family"? What to do? Could we not make certain that a four-year-old is in preschool, in a safe and clean building, and when he is six, that his school is as good as this marvelous society can provide? Can we not build schools with as much pride as the United Center, Chicago's wonderful new sports arena? And when he is eight that he has places to go and things to do. What to do? Can we not take the gun out of a little boy's hand and out of his neighborhood and out of our life so that when he gets angry, as little boys do, he learns to push and shove, but not shoot and kill?

The systems which make urban children victims, which protect the right of a few to our own lethal weapons while children continue to die, the systems which build in an unemployment factor as an inflationary hedge, the systems which encourage wealth to move out and away to green lawns and public school campuses and life isolated from everything that makes every day a struggle for survival in Cabrini-Green must, in the name of God, be challenged and changed and the victims must be empowered and organized and yes sometimes bandaged and fed and housed and clothed and held and loved.

God bless you for doing that. God give you the armor, the strength, the patience and the love. And, one thing more -- God give you the heart the courage.

That itself is a counter-culture idea.

The real danger with Beavis and Butthead, Tom Long says, is not what we think. Adult response to the television program is universally negative, because people are afraid American young people will start to imitate them. Long thinks this won't happen: the real danger is that Beavis and Butthead are cynics, they attack the heroic. Whenever anyone in their environment stands out, takes a risk, ventures off the beaten path, or even offers a gesture of wisdom or generosity or even dares to dress differently from the code, they are dismissed with the pair's favorite vulgarism. What is left is a deadly cynicism: nothing will get better, nothing -- no one -- has value life is a bad joke.

At the heart of the Christian faith and life is a call to heroism. It is a message that sounds strangely out of place. It is a gospel that is the opposite of the world's values and agenda. And it is directed to your heart and mind, to the place deep inside where we live and have our being, where we keep our dreams and aspirations and hopes, where we want to become all we can become and all God wants us to be.

At its best the church of Jesus Christ has remembered that and expressed it in its corporate life but mostly in the individual lives of its people: ordinary men and women who, in following Jesus Christ, became heroes.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who stepped out of line at Auschwitz and took the place of a husband and father condemned to die in the starvation bunker... and the others known only to you, who have been strong and courageous for you, who have taught you to be a faithful disciple by being faithful for you and to you; the ones whose life you bear within you because they gave it to you.

Ernest Becker wrote:

> "While the word 'heroic' makes us blush because it seems too big, too romantic, too triumphalistic, the truth is that to strive to be a hero, to have one's life rise above the mediocre, really to count for something extraordinary, to outshine death, to be capable of the highest generosity, to self-sacrifice, is what we most deeply want and need." [T.T. p. 201]

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news of God's love for all. It is the announcement that there is a new reality present in the life of the world. It is the Kingdom of that same Jesus Christ and in it there is justice and kindness, compassion and forgiveness and healing.

And the Gospel is summons to be part of that Kingdom, the company of all those who know about it and live in it: summons to live as if each child of God is precious, worth the best we can provide and produce: summons to challenge every power that resists and denies the reality of that Kingdom.

The Gospel is God's call to you and me to be all we can for the kingdom, to live out our lives as part of God's great commonwealth.

> "So, dearly beloved, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God's power. Put on the whole armor of God."

Amen.